[Irish Cook--Brookfield]

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NAME OF WORKER LOUISE BASSETT

ADDRESS SHERMAN STREET, BROOKFIELD

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SUBJECT LIVING LORE

NAME OF INFORMANT MARY ANNE MEEHAN

ADDRESS BROOKFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

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Mary Anne Meehan was sick with the grippe. She had been very sick but was on the road to recovery although still nursing a bad cough and a hair-trigger temper. We were invited to help “cheer her up.” We wanted an interview for it had been difficult to get interviews in the last few weeks with the town suffering a siege of grippe - so we went to offer Marry Anne a little cheer. It must have worked for Mary Anne asked us to come back - which we intend to do.

Name Louise G. Bassett

Topic Living Lore

Assignment Brookfield

Topic Mary Anne Meehan

Mary Anne Meehan has the grippe and Mary Anne resents that fact with her whole heart and soul. And when Mary Anne puts her whole heart and soul into anything, she makes a magnificent job of it.

I had been asked to come in and “cheer” her up, which, upon my arrival at her home, I realized was to be no easy task.

However, after having asked all about, AND HEARING ALL about the numberless aches and pains that Mary Anne, at the present time, is heir to, I ventured to asks hoping to divert her minds, “How did you ever happen to become a cook, Mary Anne?”

“I didn't happen” snapped Mary Anne, “I always was. I can't remember hardly when I couldn't cook. My mother was a corker ‘round a stove. She could boil a ten penny nail an' make it taste good, an' I jest sorta took after her.

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“I was 'specially good at pastry an' cakes. Tarts, pies, biscuits an' short cakes. Things like that I could whip up in no time an' they was good, too, an' I could always make good coffee. I always had to make it when there was anythin' big goin' on.”

“Oh, do tell me how you make it. I've never been able to make decent coffee?”

“Any fool should be able to make good coffee”, says Mary Anne to me.

I ducked.

“I make it exactly like everybody else makes it, only mine is always good. There's nothing better than a good cup of coffee. Haven't 2 you often wished you could get a cup of coffee that would taste as good as th’ aroma from a big coffee roastin' plant a couple o' blocks away?

“Yes,” she mused, settling in her wide bed, “I always could cook, I hired out as a cook when I was about fourteen.”

“Fourteen — good heavens, Mary Anne, how did you dare?”

“Well, I could cooks couldn't I? An' I was big an' strong. Why shouldn't I have?”

To be honest I saw no reason why she “shouldn't have” and even if I had, I doubt if I would have ventured to argue the point, for Mary Anne was undoubtedly feeling better AND a bit belligerent.

“Jane hated work an' she was awful clever ‘bout gettin' out of doin' anythin' an' Gussie was never strong. Youh know she was sick a long time before she died. So youh see I was elected to help with th’ cookin', but I didn't mind — I liked to do it.”

“Tell me about your first positions if you feel up to it,” I coaxed.

“Heavens, 'twan't a positions I was th’ hired girl, or th’ help, though in those days th’ help or hired girl — whatever you want to call her, was more or less a member of th’ family. ‘More’, if th’ family was real people — ‘less' if they was tryin' to be swells.

“I always et at the same table an' after th’ supper dishes was done — washed an' put away — if I wasn't goin' anywhere, I'd set in with th’ family, usually around th’ dinin' table, in th’ dinin' room.

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We'd all be doin' somethin', makin' patches for quilts or sewin' carpet rags.

“There was what was called a ‘hangin' lamps in that room. It was a coal oil lamp an' could be pulled up an' down on brass chains, 'twas real handy. There was one in th’ parlor, too, but that one was more elegant, it had crystals hangin' down.

“Th’ first folks I worked for was tryin' to break into th’ upper crust. Youh see, everybody went with everybody else at times. Still there was some folks whose houses youh didn't prance into unless youh was asked, an' some of us never got asked.

“That was nothin' against youh, of courses only there was always jest a little difference an' these folks, while they had moneys was jest kinda on th’ edge of th’ outside lookin' in.

“Th’ lady of th’ house, I'll call her Mrs. Smith. Youh wouldn't know her, probably never heard of her, anyway. Well, she wasn't sure of her husband, I guess. She kept herself dressed to th’ nines and she spent a quarter of her time curlin' her hair.

“She'd put her curlin' iron down in th’ lamp an' get it hot that way an' of course, it got smutty an' she'd use it that way an' that kept her hair lookin' dark. But there was some white in it when she washed it but I don't think her husband ever knew it.

“We all curled our hair that way — only most of us wiped off th’ smut. In those days girls wore lots of ribbons — we'd have ribbons an' ribbons all over us an' this lady of mine, while she wa'nt a girl, 4 had a ribbon everywhere she could put it. An' was she a fluffy person — she was, dearie, she was. She used to tell me what to do an' most of th’ time she was wrong, an' kid that I was, I knew it, too, so, I'd do as I pleased an' she never seemed to know th’ difference.

“It was a set rule that youh washed Monday, no matter if it rained cats an' dogs — youh ironed on Tuesday — I'd put everything that needed mendin' in a big wash basket an' Wednesday I mended. Thursday I cleaned house, Fridays I aired th’ beds an' cleaned special things — Saturday was bakin' day. I'd bake a big crock full of cookies, at least a dozen pies, lots more sometimes, three or four cakes, a big crock full of doughnuts, I made bread twice a week an' I'd always make raised biscuits th’ days I made bread.

“I hated Sunday most, we always had a big dinner an' we always used th’ best china, an' did I dread that — th’ doggone stuff was same th’ boss's father or mother had had handed down to them an' was they fussy.”

“You must have worked hard in those days, Mary Anne,” I ventured.

“ ‘Course I did, but it didn't do me no hurt. Was good for me and don't forget we had our good times too in those days. My goodness how times have changed. My, but people were awful narrow those days. My — my — wouldn't we shock 'em now? They was really funny — they didn't trust anybody's morals. Take th’ time I was cookin' for those people I've been tellin' youh about. After I'd been workin' there a few months — maybe eight, nine, Mrs. Smith died.

“There were four children, th’ oldest girl was only a bit younger than me, but do youh spose my mother would let me stay there at night?

Not by a jugful, she wouldn't. Right after my supper dishes was done I made tracks for home an' if I was later than she thought I had ought to be, maybe I didn't get a tongue lashing.

“My reputation would have been absolutely ruined if I had slept in that house one night — can you imagine? An' th’ poor man, I don't believe he knew if I was black or white or if I was around half th’ time.

“An' when I got to be twenty-one an' two an' wasn't married an' no signs of bein', my gracious, how upset my mother was. You see that made me an' old maid, which was a disgrace. Fact is — 'disgrace’ ain't hardly big enough a word. Mother would pretend she didn't want me to marry until I was older an' many's th’ time I've seen her raise her eyebrows an' look at a neighbor real wise like, actin' like I'd had a beau that I'd turned down. Of course th’ neighbor would know it wa'n't so for in those days everybody knew everybody's business.

“When I see girls turn down real nice lads nowadays, jest because they want to be independent, it makes me smile, when I look back an' think how most girls then would take anybody rather than be a old maid.

“We girls kept my mother in hot water most of th’ time, an' yet we didn't do one really bad thing. Take th’ time Mother caught me puttin' flour on my face for powder, my, how she carried on. I suppose I should have felt wicked, but I didn't.

“She wa'n't different from any th’ other mothers. They was all alike in th’ whole town. They all worried about nothin'. All th’ girls 6 put powder or flour on their faces on th’ sly. What do youh suppose they'd have done if they'd seen a girl pull out a vanity case right before 'em an' begin to make up? They'd have died — jest died.”

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“Mary Anne, how did Brookfield, when you were a girl, compare with the Brookfield of today?” I asked.

“Well, it was lots better in many ways an' again it wa'n't. There was very little what youh call class distinction — least wise — not so youh could notice it much. Everybody went to th’ same dances an' socials, folks was friendly an' neighborly. If any one was sick we knew it right away an' took 'em soup or something or we'd offer to set up with 'em an' do things like that. Course there was a few who just didn't have much to do with any but Yankees like themselves. They was a little set o' them. Awful clannish too, but most of us got along real neighborly.

“Now-a-days you could die an' your next door neighbor wouldn't know it until they saw th’ crepe or ferns or what ever gadgets they put on th’ doors today.”

“How do you account for that?” I inquired.

“Th’ automobile — jest th’ automobile. Folks are jest as nice today only they have so many other interests — outside interests — to keep them busy an' wear 'em out.”

“Such as what?” I asked.

“Movies, for one thing, I love 'em, go every time I have a chance an' th’ radio, too, that's jest as bad as th’ automobiles, come to think of it. I went to a church bridge th’ other nights played at one table 7 with a woman who had lived here over a year an' I'd never heard of her. That couldn't have happened in th’ old days.

“Of course, th’ town was alive then, a thrivin' town, I guess you'd call it. There was all kinds of stores — everybody worked at something. Some had big wages — some small — some folks was poor, that is, they didn't have all they wanted but there was very little real poverty — no one went hungry.

“Of course, there was th’ poor farm an' for years they had a few folks there — old people an' usually there would be three or four simple-minded folks. Then, by an' by, they got to be so few it didn't pay to keep up th’ farm an' th’ half dozen that might have been there was sent to other towns; that had poor farms an' Brookfield paid board for 'em. An' so th’ poor house, which was a nice big farm house, off on a side road — in a sort of woods likes stood empty for three or four years. One day some one, who knew about where it was, was drivin' by an' they couldn't see it. There wa'n't no house there. Well, at first he couldn't believe his eyes — out it was a fact — th’ house was gone — burned down completely. They could tell from th’ ashes an' all that it had been some time before it was discovered. That shows how things was in Brookfield in those days, don't it?

“Talkin' about bein' at a bridge party for a church th’ other night - my — how times have changed. Why, when I was a girl, playin' cards was a terrible sin. We kids used to sneak an' play out in th’ barn an' every little while my mother would run across a pack of our cards an' she'd tear 'em in little pieces an' forbid us buyin' any more, but of course 8 we always did.

“Parents was awful stricts girls 'specially had to walk a chalk line. It used to be great fun to go down to th’ depot an' see th’ trains come in but nice girls wasn't allowed to go — men an' boys always went but we girls dasen't.

“In [those?] days we used to have 'travelin' men come to town. We call 'em salesmen now. A lot of 'em would be real good lookers, too, but 'twas as much as your life was worth to look at once, let alone speak to him.

“When they'd come on th’ train, some man would report that a good lookin' travelin' man had come to town an' we girls'd hear it. Somehow we'd always hear it an' we'd be all excited up.

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“Brookfield was kind-of a center town then. Th’ travelin' men would come here an' put up at th’ Metropole Hotel — that was our best hotel in those days, an' then they'd hire a rig from th’ livery stable an' have a man drive 'em to th’ North an' th’ West an' to Ware an' to Warren an' to Spencer. That meant they'd be here a whole week.

“Jane an' me was full of th’ old Nick an' we took some awful chances some times, but no matter what we did we hardly ever got caught, natural born crooks, I suppose.

“But we did get caught up with one time an' that was when we flirted with a travelin' man — my — my — he was good lookin'. I can see him now an' he was a nice lad, too. After supper all th’ men stoppin' at th’ hotel, if it was a nice nights would go set out on th’ 9 porch. So, this night was no different an' me an' Jane walked by th’ hotel — Oh — I guess a dozen times an' this lad finally comes an' speaks. I was so scared I could only giggle but Janey who wasn't scared of th’ devil himselfs wise-cracked an' I remember he laughed an' laughed at her. She was funny. By an' by, he asked if we'd had supper. Of course we had, but Jane said ‘No', so he took us into th’ dinin' room and fed us. Up to then I'd never been in a hotel dinin' room before an' I was so scared I honestly couldn't see but Jane wa'n't— she loved it.

“Then he said, ‘Let's go buggy ridin'. I got up enough courage to say ‘I don't want to go', but Jane dragged me along an' by that time I could hardly walk — I had to be dragged. We got home about eight or a bit after an' mother was waitin for us. Oh, yes, dear lady, my mother was waitin' for us. Th’ whole town knew about it, of course, an' some parents forbid their kids to speak to us, we was jest ‘fast’ an' take things at home an' people not speakin' to us, life was some tough for — I guess — about six or eight months.

“Funny thing, th’ nicest folks in town, we called 'em th’ ‘aristocrats', was fine to us girls, called it ‘only a young girl's prank’ an' these same people, who'd never called on my mother before, came to see her an' told her not to let it worry her, — we didn't mean any harm. Youh've no idea how it consoled her an' pleased her, too.

“To be honests she put on airs about it, when one of her pals would say something about what we'd done she'd quote — very haughtily — something Mrs. ‘Aristocrat’ had said. An' that'd shut her friend up.”

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“Did you ever see your traveling friend again?” I ventured to ask.

“Yep, he come to see my mother when he come to town th’ next time an' explained things — said he was jest lonesome an' Jane was so amusin' that there was no harm meant. My mother liked him very much but she wouldn't let him give us some candy he had brought us. She made him take it away with him. But Jane had gone out th’ back door an' met him at th’ side gate took th’ candy, sneaked it in th’ house an' we et it. It was th’ most delicious candy I ever et — it was SO WICKED.

“There was a lot more pretense in Brookfield than there is today, that's one big thing in Brookfield's favor today. There used to be a lot of men that was called ‘God fearing an' ‘upright citizens' an ‘Pillars of th’ church’. There's nothing like that now — folks are real — themselves —

“We kids used to be on to a lot of those old cusses, they had their fun on th’ sly[.?] I could give youh th’ names of at least six of 'em — but I won't.

“We talked among ourselves about 'em but not to th’ older folks, they wouldn't have believed us an' we might have got a lickin'. Kids got 'em those days. I don't approve of th’ way kids are bein' brought up these days. When I was young it was considered wicked to take things easy. It was wicked not to work an' everybody did work. Girls whose parents had a comfortable livin' didn't go out to work, of course, but they knew all about keepin' house.

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“I believe lookin back it gave us a sense of — wells of security—a feelin' that if we had to we could fight th’ world — we didn't kick if we had hard jobs to do, we jest went ahead an' did 'em. If I had anything to wear, I worked for it an' so when I got it I enjoyed it — enjoyed it lots, an' if it was clothes, believe you me, I took care of 'em. Most kids nowadays wear something a couple of times an' then think it's a ‘old rag’. Folks indulge their young ‘uns until there's no livin' with 'em. They haven't any manners, it makes me see red to hear a mother say, 'tell Mary Anne, thank you, dear.’ My mother didn't have to tell me to say 'thank you’. I knew enough to do it without bein, told.

“You can't blame th’ young ‘uns, though. 'tain't their fault, th’ parents give 'em too much freedom — too much leisure an' luxuries without their havin' to work for 'em. They'd be nice kids, all right, if they had half a chance.

“Our parents knew what they was doin'. Life ain't easy an' nobody can make it easy for anybody. Folks pet an' pamper kids nowadays — what for? The're goin' to get more hard knocks than we did — we was sort-of ready for 'em — but these poor little devils ain't.”

The room was growing dark with the approach of evening, but Mary Anne seemed not to notice. She was too absorbed in “the old days” until a sudden fit of coughing ended the interview in a flurry of excuses, protests and hastily administered remedies. Mary Anne, brought back to the present, remembered the grippe and began to tell of “my back said my head — it fairly swims and ——-” so on for the rest of the symptoms.